DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 072 FL 021 539

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TITLE An Essay on Toffee Apple and Treacle Tart, Being an Imitation of Cockney Punning for TOEFL and TEASL.
PUB DATE Aug 89
NOTE 7p.; For the complete journal, see FL 021 534.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT CUHK Papers in Linguistics; n1 p105-110 Aug 1989

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Language Variation; *Second Language Instruction; Standard Spoken Usage
IDENTIFIERS Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) in different lights and from different angles. Particular attention is focused on the following: (1) language acquisition is an intellectual process; (2) the goal for the second-language learner is mastery; (3) the standard of English in Hong Kong; and (4) "standard" English. (VWL)

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ED 364 072

AN ESSAY ON TOFFEE APPLE AND TREACLE TART, BEING AN IMITATION OF COCKNEY PUNNING FOR TOEFL AND TEASL.

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Time was when one either learnt English or one didn't, either one knew English or one didn't. That straight forward position has since been defined as a two-tiered system, English as a second or non-native language and English as a first or native language. With that shift in perspective has come the burgeoning industry of Teaching-English-as-a-second-language. Thus, like Adam and his animals, with naming comes being, and ontology is coupled with concept. Trained-profetssional-specialists now know the entity called non-native-English and it is the language non-English, non-Australian, non-American, etc., people are to study and learn. The phrase second language is meaningless without its being measured against a first. The first-and-native-English-language is the ideal standard against which is pitched the second-rate imitation. Presumably, the latter, at its very best, can only be a tolerable version of the former.

Now that it has a name, it can be presented to the non-native learner of English as a neatly circumscribed and nicely packaged subject. His position in relation to the subject is clear, he is a second-language learner and he is to achieve the maximum standard of a second language user. For him to aim for anything beyond would be unthinkably pretentious or down-right indecent, possibly immoral. This attitude is sufficiently accepted by one and all for the native-speaker to take for granted his position of unquestioned superiority, while the second-language speaker languishes behind a taken-for granted inferiority.

That was by way of introduction. The following will examine the teaching-of-English-as-a-second-language in different lights from different angles. Among other things, TEASL is an educational situation, a pedagogic activity; it is not a subject like history, physics or English. It is a very complex situation which takes in more factors than pedagogy alone; it

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bears examination like a piece of glass with multiple facets.

1. Language acquisition is an intellectual process; for the foreign student, it does not come "naturally". A native language is by definition unavailable to anyone not born to it. It would be unrealistic for the student to aim for "native" fluency as an initial goal. Instead, he can concentrate on using the learnt language as a tool for thought. Understandably, this is no easy task as two different processes of learning are at work side by side: language acquisition and the clarification of thought. However, learning will thus by put where it belongs, that is within the confines of mental capacity and not within the prescription of a native condition. Surely, this approach is particularly apposite to the contexts of a university. To think clearly is the ambition of any intelligent person in any language. It is just conceivable that the non-native's struggle with language ability stimulates rather than deters conceptual ability, for effortful articulation needs subject matter to work on. Alternatively, not every native-speaker is articulate by virtue of his being just that.

The two-tiered classificaiton of language usage can give a false impression of clarity, it can oversimplify a very complex situation in which native speakers and non-native speakers blur the lines between language ability and thinking ability in their usage of language. It is not within the scope of this essay to address such complexities; it merely cautions against smugness on the part of the native language user and against an excuse for laziness on the part of the non-native language user. In any case, the terms native-speaker's English and non-native speaker's English do not add up to clear categories. As English becomes more international, it necessarily becomes less English. Auden's words about Yeats helps me to make my point,

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of the dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

(W.H. Auden, from "In Memory of W.B. Yeats")

American English alone testifies to how English has become very un-English indeed, and

yet it goes by the name of English all the same. There are universities in England which offer courses on English-American comparative studies. Thus, English and American are both different and the same, a sure sign that English has become "modified".

2. The goal for the second-language learner, however remote, must be that of mastery; fluency of one kind or another will come of its own accord once the language begins to feel pliable and of service. For mastery, the student does not go to every Tom, Dick or Harry of a native speaker, he goes to the proven masters of the language, and there are hundreds and hundreds of them, from poets to politicians, from lawyers to philosophers, to the occasional scientist, etc.

This leads to an embarrassing situation vis-a-vis the teachers of English-as-a-second-language. They come from an endless variety of disciplines; provided they have a diploma in teaching-English-as-a-second-language, they teach it. They may also be very impressive specialists who know all about testing, comprehension, language-acquisition, etc., but who cannot tell a bad line of, say, Tennyson's from a good line of Tennyson's, simply because they have not read Tennyson and do not intend to. The fundamental questions remain: how well do they know the English Language in terms of its achievements over the ages? How well will they be able to guide the foreign student as to what is good English and what is merely hackneyed? Surely, it is reasonable enough to ask teachers of English how well they know English and how good their own English is. The story goes that Winston Churchill did badly in Classics at school because he spent his time studying the English Language. A good command of English didn't come "naturally" even to a Churchill!

3. The standard of English in Hong Kong has been falling, we are told. Jeremiads have been ponderously and urgently delivered from various quarters of power and authority in the colony, claiming that the end of good English will also bring the end of Hong Kong's "prosperity" et al, considering how Hong Kong must remain an international centre and that English is the international language. A most charming method of redress has recently been introduced which uses English pop-songs for teaching English. Well and fine, we might even brighten up Legco chambers and directoral board-rooms with our future bright young things talking to the tune of

"Tall and tan and young and lovely, the girl from Ipanema goes walking", or "Try to remember the kind of September when you were a young and callow fellow". It is anybody's guess as to why such language samples are better tools for learning than, say, "Our dynasty came in because of a great sensibility" (E. Pound, from "The Cantos"), or "The best lack all conviction while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity" (W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming").

The end of the world may or may not be imminent, but whether it comes as a result of "falling English standards" is another matter. Does good English make or break a career, one asks? "Let observation, with extensive view,/ Survey mankind,...." (S. Johnson, from "The Vanity of Human Wishes") from Hong Kong to Kowloon: there is for example the top tycoon who prefers to speak English "ungrammatically", there is the top banker whose delightful Scottish accent prevents some of his colleagues from understanding him, there is the marvellous politician who does not venture beyond platitudes and repetition, when speaking in English. One suspects that one has to "make it" first and then have one's English accepted as it is. Japan looms large as an example. It is possible, just possible, that English is not as vitally important as it is made out to be. This sense of importance may be an expression of imperial sensibilities that have come to roost in its language when the empire itself has disappeared. Know English for what it's worth (and it's worth a great deal in the hands of masters) and get on with it, without the shackles of any mystique that may be attached to it as-a-first-language or as-a-second-language. At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that Hong Kong English (if there is such a thing) will be prefectly acceptable if Hong Kong business carries on as usual, not vice-versa.

The state of "falling English standards" is not a local monopoly. About a decade or so ago, Harvard University noted this phenomenon among its students and the authorities there considered making Year 1 Composition compulsory for all students. In England, teachers complain that on average, students nowadays make more grammar mistakes and cannot spell, and they say it is because grammar schools, where Latin was taught, have become obsolete. Now, there is a curious and fascinating coincidence in the non-native language picture. As teaching-English-as-a-second-language becomes more and more an established discipline, as the industry daily

grows, complete with tapes and special recordings, books with the appropriate questions and exercises to aid and educate the foreign learner, specialized materials prepared by specialists specially tailored for situations and levels that have been carefully deduced from highly controlled tests, the more these very specialists complain of poor English standards. The two events appear to have developed in direct proportion to each other. I look forward to a specialist evaluation of this scenario as to whether it is coincidence or an actual cause and effect relationship.

4. Eight thousand or so miles from the United Kingdom, the term native-English takes on a clarity and finality prescribed by distance. England and its native-England-language lie that-a-way, the imaginary signboard says. I'm reminded of an actual signboard on the M1 as you leave London which says in one universal sweep, "The North". You can well appreciate the immense simplificaiton of that sign when you recall that there is more of England north of London than there is south of London. (Albeit now they call it once again a country of two nations and the south dominates even more than normally).

It doesn't take much experience with the language to realize that English is anything but monolingual or homogeneous, there are many Englishes even within England itself. The most obvious demarcations are regional, class and educational ones. Among those, class language is the most difficult to pin down. By its very nature, class language is beyond definition. Class language is natural to a particular class: to members of that calss, such usage and none other is English as understood by them. A friend (English) once remarked that some English people didn't speak English, the example she gave was as follows. She went into an ordinary London cafe and asked for a roll. The waitress very kindly advised her against it, as the bread was "stile". That was twenty plus years ago; to this day, she still cannot translate "stile" into "stale". For her, the English waitress simply didn't speak English.

Another equally precise person once complained to me that she was surprised at my inviting to tea together with her someone who wasn't even nice. Let me try to illustrate. XY complained that AB was not even nice. Had AB known about that comment, she would certainly have said that XY was not nice to think her not nice. The question is, who is nice? Are they

both nice or are they both not nice? The answer lies in the fact that "nice" means rather different things in different class languages. What XY was saying was that AB should not have been included because she did not even belong to the same class. But to say it so plainly would not be "a nice thing" to do. It is "nice" to assume the whole world to be "nice". In order to make that a reality, you associate only with "nice" people. You do not even acknowledge the existence of "not nice" people, let alone their language. By the very same token, that la-di-da, hoity-toity, plummy speech is not quite English either to your solid salt of the earth, for whom stale (if you insist) is stile and nothing else.

It is hoped that this essay has muddied the waters enough so that nothing is simply what it appears to be.

Teaching-English-as-a-second-language will continue from strength to strength in terms of a discipline and an industry. Whether it will be rigidly circumscribed by a prescriptive point of view, which ignores the real educational situation, or whether it will be handled with intelligence, subtlety and imagination remains to be seen.